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Pim Higginson. Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa. James Currey, 2017.

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Abstract

Review of Pim Higginson. Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa. James Currey, 2017.

Keywords

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To map and explain the ways in which French and Francophone African novelists and filmmakers negotiate the cult of jazz and its tropes from the 1920s to the present, Pim Higginson deploys a powerful metaphor: "racial scoring," or early critics' and writers' infusion of racial stereotypes into their reception of jazz's complexities. *Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa* begins with the interwar avant-garde's depiction of jazz as a fetish or totem of black identity, which they believed to be anchored in emotion, spontaneity, and orality. This misleading construct, Higginson argues, grew out of a long trend within Western thought (from Plato through Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Gobineau) of subordinating music, represented as a lesser means of expression, to writing. Francophone novelists, whether they were contemporary witnesses of the "tumulte noir" (1), jazz's invasion of interwar Paris nightclubs, or indirect heirs of the music's mythical legacy, confronted a "race-producing apparatus in which they . . . were always already implicated" (2). A major vehicle for the racial score is the jazz shibboleth, which Higginson defines as an author's or filmmaker's exhibition, and even flaunting, of deep familiarity with the culture and history of the great jazz icons, namely Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and others. The recurrence and persistence of this shibboleth convey "a history (read through race) where . . . traditional (mostly white) critics have (whether consciously or not) retained a uniquely powerful role in assuring the coherence and stability of the music's racial boundaries" (6).

Chapter 1 traces how French novelists use jazz to define their narrators' and characters' search for identity. Higginson highlights how Philippe Soupault, in *Le Nègre* ('The Negro,' 1927), depicts jazz as a reaction to, and revitalization of, moribund European culture. Jean-Paul Sartre similarly presents a simplified understanding of jazz in *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938), where the protagonist Roquentin finds his identity in the popular jazz song, "Some of these days," yet confirms the racial score's emphasis on black orality by erroneously stating that the song's African American composer was Jewish and that the Jewish singer was black. Higginson argues that although Boris Vian was aware of jazz's mystifications, episodes in his novel *L'Écume des jours* (*Mood Indigo*, 1947), like the one where character Colin tries to learn the *biglemoi*, a boogie-woogie-like dance, ironically confirm the score as a medium for (re)crafting white identity. These novels are a prelude to what Higginson calls the "abject whiteness" (82) found in Tanguy Viel's *Le Black Note* (1998), Christian Gailly's *Be-bop* (1995), and Enzo Cormann's *Vita Nova Jazz* (2011), where white musicians emulate jazz masters but never find their own style.

In Chapter 2, Higginson focuses on Francophone novelists' "querying" (97), or contestation, of the racial score through their exploration of the impasses it creates for their characters. Ousmane Socé, in *Mirages de Paris* ('Paris Mirages,' 1937), condemns jazz's "*métisse* cast of American musicians and dancers who sell themselves . . . to their white audience" (115). Emmanuel Dongala's sci-fi spoof of jazz's powers in "Jazz et vin de palme" ('Jazz and Palm Wine'), the titular piece of his 1982 collection, turns more solemn in "A Love Supreme," a story where jazzophiles' cult-like worship of John Coltrane confirms the racial score by tying jazz to "the emotional . . . dimension of being" (128). The racial violence the characters encounter on America's streets, however, undermines the power for change that Dongala attributes to jazz. The jazz-like, improvisational wandering narrative of Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* ('Too Much Sun Kills Love,' 1999) reflects an irrational, violence-filled African world that, as Higginson suggests, overrides the characters' love of jazz and, more importantly for Beti, devalues writing.

In Chapter 3, Higginson turns to the analysis of recent Francophone novels that overtly contest the racial score and jazz shibboleth. In Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* (2014), "names of [jazz] artists and tunes remain as degraded *lieux de mémoire*" (154) 'sites of memory' in a dystopian Africa. Abdourahman Waberi's *La Divine Chanson* ('The Divine Song,' 2015) portrays aged musician Kamau-Williams's attempted comeback, but the narrative's obsessive allusions to Paris's and New York's "mythical jazz venues" (167) underscore that Kamau-Williams is trapped in his fans' misperceived categorizations of his earlier music. Kangni Alem's *Cola-Cola Jazz* (2002), which occurs in the fictional nation of Ti-Brava, in reference to Duke Ellington's "Togo Brava Suite," augments the repertory of iconic jazz tunes with modern African "diasporic music," "far more popular and democratic than the American form whose entry into the realm of high art Ellington . . . tried to negotiate" (153). Léonora Miano's *Blues pour Élise* ('Blues for Élise,' 2010), which Higginson sees as a turning point in the treatment of the jazz trope, undercuts the shibboleth by incorporating "a multitude of diaspora traditions and performers" beyond jazz, crafting "a new Afropean . . . subjectivity" (175) opposed to French interwar racial scoring of the music.

In Chapter 4, Higginson contrasts two films embodying the racial score: Edmond T. Gréville's *Princesse Tam-Tam* (*Princess Tam-Tam*, 1935), which is the story of Aouïna, a Tunisian street urchin played by Josephine Baker whom Parisian Max tries to reshape into a European model of elegance, and Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001), starring the eponymous Senegalese avatar inspired by Prosper Mérimée's and Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1845/1875). Aouïna discards the cultural trappings imposed on her and performs Baker's celebrated jazz dance, naïvely revealing what Higginson deems to be the novel's "clockwork of empire, race, gender, sexuality" (189). In *Karmen Geï*, however, David Murray's transnational

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soundtrack surrounds jazz with other genres, thereby contesting the racial score. And Karmen's version of the famous aria, the *habanera*, sung behind stage instead of in front of an audience, critiques the illusion of the theater and the racial context that the protagonist battles. Although these musical devices challenge jazz's racial score, it remains nonetheless too persistent to be evaded entirely.

Higginson convincingly analyzes questions of race that pervade French and Francophone works about jazz, with later chapters forming a crescendo of original riffs that sap and contest the score and shibboleth in postcolonial works. *Scoring Race* will be of interest to those examining the racially fraught relationship between jazz, its colonial and postcolonial audiences, and the critics, novelists, and filmmakers who incorporate it in their works as they attempt to maneuver with, or outmaneuver, an iconic but ambiguous musical heritage.

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